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PUBLIC EDUCATION AND RELIGION.

A

Baccalaureate Sermon

DELIVERED JUNE 23, 1867,

BY

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SERMON.

MATT. VII, 24. Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man which built his house upon a rock.

The simple fact that it is customary in our American Universities when students have completed their course of general and disciplinary study, for the President to preach to them on the Sabbath what is called a Baccalaureate Sermon, is proof that a profound religious sentiment was entertained by the founders of our first universities. The motto of the oldest college in North America is "Christo et Ecclesiæ," and the spirit of that motto, to a great extent, permeates all our colleges. You are about to graduate from a University conducted by the State, and which received its existence from the nation—a nation whose destiny it is to solve practically the difficult problem how to favor religion and to be religious, and at the same time guarantee to all perfect freedom of religious opinion and practice. Its institutions must partake of its own character, sharing in its difficulties and its advantages, and in no particular is this characteristic more conspicuous than in their relations to religion.

In other lands many, and in this country a few, cautious defenders of Christianity, more technical than comprehensive in their opinions, have maintained that a nation allowing complete religious freedom must of necessity become indifferent to religious truth and error, and practically irreligious and atheistic. Some, while they recoil from this conclusion with regard to the nation in general, still insist that this fatal necessity exists in regard to public schools created and sustained by

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the State alone; and many who reject this conclusion with reference to the public schools for children, still insist that this must be the fact in regard to State Universities.

Now if logic is to decide this problem in one particular it must in all. The premises are the same, the conclusions must be identical. If the University, supported by the State, must be indifferent to religion, then so must be all the public schools, so also the nation. But if either is not under this fatal necessity, all are emancipated from it.

Some who pronounce the theoretical objection to our Government unanswerable, allow that facts in this country do not substantiate the logic, and therefore pronounce the opinion false, though they confess themselves unable to detect the fallacy in the premises or conclusion. Nations that allow perfect freedom in religion, they say, ought, logically, to be irreligious; if this country is not so there must be some peculiar accidental occasion or cause why it is not so, for the present, while in the end religion will be banished from the State and all its institutions.

These men fall into the great error of supposing that religious truths must be upheld by the governmental machinery of nations. They do not comprehend the profound thought of Christ in his announcement, "my kingdom is not of this world." God has a kingdom of which Jesus Christ is the appointed Head, which began to exist before human governments were formed, and exists and maintains its power independent of all human institutions. It has had various organizations of its own, and has now the Christian Church, but in its prime authority it is seated on the throne of the human heart, maintained there by the energy of the Holy Spirit, emanating from the Father and from the Son, and while God is, and man exists, not totally abandoned and ruined, that kingdom must abide. All that this kingdom asks of human governments is, that they should not oppose its demands by inflicting pains or penalties upon its subjects, who are cultivating righteousness by prayer and good works, and that it shall not encourage its enemies by rewarding unrighteousness and giving exclusive privileges to

those who either oppose or stand aloof from Christianity. In other words it asks only protection and a fair field in which to exercise its spiritual forces.

With such equal privileges it undertakes to attack, overcome and annihilate its enemies, not by physical force, not by bodily pains and penalties, not by claiming exclusive privileges, not by ridicule and sarcasm chiefly, but by the positive exhibition of its own intrinsic loveliness, by appealing to the conscience, by informing the mind, by removing much wretchedness and sorrow, and converting inevitable evil into good; by demonstrating on the largest scale that it supplies the great wants of humanity and furnishes precisely what every man needs and ought to desire.

If this is Christianity, and if this is its relation to human government, we are prepared to expect that precisely where human government confines itself most perfectly to its own sphere—to protect life and property and liberty, and encourage order and industry—there the spiritual kingdom of God, employing its own forces through its own organizations, will be the most successful in winning the attention, admiration and obedience of men, and finally, acting through individuals, in giving to the government itself a positively christian character. This we do see. And in our own nation is the most conspicuous demonstration of this truth.

In looking at the facts in the history of our own country which illustrate this proposition, we should remember the peculiar and strong obstacles which the religion of Christ has been compelled here to oppose. First among these has been the tendency to outlawry and barbarism in a nomadic and wilderness life. Our area has been practically unlimited. The pressure of territorial restrictions has been removed. A boundless wilderness has been opened up before a few people. They have scattered by colonies, squads, families and individuals, through the valleys, along the water courses, on the hills and over the prairies. They have gone, by overland journeys and by long sea voyages, farther from our own centres of travel and learning than the most adventuresome of ancient days ever

traveled, either for spoils or information. This has constantly created a tendency towards rudeness, unculture and the loss of christian character. Were the population of these United States gathered into New York and Pennsylvania, and had they never expanded beyond the limits of these two States, they would have been relieved from much extra labor, and it would have been easier to sustain education, art and religion, as in the great nations of Europe in which christianity has most conspicuously excited its power. In such a case we should not have been scourged by a civil war. Who can estimate what might have been the triumphs of christian civilization among us, untrammelled as now ?

Another difficulty peculiar to us, at least in its form, has been the heterogeneity of the origin of our population in nationality, language, custom, and in church connection and prejudice.

This heterogeneity of origin and language has also transferred to our shores those various church organizations which were engendered in other lands and other times in fierce contests, or as reactions against abuses and tyranny, and which, transplanted to these shores, have in some instances expanded into strange growths, and sought to perpetuate prejudices and customs, the occasion for which does not here exist.

Under the perfect freedom of our government also the wildest conceits of eccentric minds have had opportunity to test their power for good or evil as in no other country. Shakers, Oneida Communities, Mormons, and other insane associations, are allowed to violate the laws of decency even, so long as they do not interfere with other people. All this tends to distract the attention of the feeble-minded, and to fling contempt upon genuine religion.

Still in the midst of all these abuses, having a fair field to work in, the religion of Jesus Christ has made more advancement in these United States during the past century than in any other part of the world, and to-day, if the headquarters of the church in its great enterprise of evangelising the world are to be sought in any one nation, it is in this country.

Now, young men, without time to elaborate or fortify these positions, any farther than to assert them and to ask you to

verify them by a mental glance over the nations of Christendom, and believing that the preponderating mental and moral influence of the civilized world is to flow out from this country during the next century, I shall ask your attention for an hour to a consideration of the question ; What are the peculiar claims of Christianity upon our young men of thought and education ?

Let us consider this subject simply upon the basis of human reason.

Every thing strives after its own perfection. This is an ultimate fact, reached not by the reason primarily, but by induction. After, however, it is reached by induction, the reason approves and admires this law. It is universal in its comprehension. Even inorganic things seem to be striving after their own perfection. The forces which make them seem to be constantly employing their energies to work out their best results.

In illustrating this law, if it is *universal*, it matters not where we begin. We cannot strike amiss. Put forth your hands at random and seize upon any object and you will find the statement true. The sun itself was once a nebula, embracing all the planets, primary and secondary ; now by successive condensation it has become a sun. The earth was once chaos, now it is an inhabitable world. Once it was without life, then the humblest, simplest forms of vegetable and animal life appeared, finally it became fit for the dwelling place of man. It is still progressing. Geology constantly reveals this law. Every individual class, genus, and species, grows upward toward perfection, nor disappears till a higher takes its place. It is so with races, nations, families, individuals. Exceptions are limited, temporary, and only ebbings in the onward sweeping tide. It is the life, the idea of everything, to subsist and make the most of itself.

Now man is no exception to this law. At present he is the crowning illustration of this divine determination. The best of men, the wisest of men entertain this faith.

It becomes then the great problem of the ages, the great effort of thinking, self-controlling, willing and acting man, to

determine what is the ideal of humanity, individually and generally, and to strive towards the attainment of the grand ideal. If man is only an instrument, like the earth, the ocean, or like an inferior animal, then he need not trouble himself with such investigations, but unwittingly and by necessity he will work out his destiny. Some future investigators of a higher order will study the geology of the planet, and tracing the upward progress from the long azoic ages through palaeontological periods, finally culminating in the removal of the genus man and the introduction of its successor, will deny to the human race any mind that differed from his predecessors in nature, but only in degree. But we do not so read man. It is not self-love, but fact, that reveals to us in our race something more than instinct, and something higher than an animal life. The great intelligence of the universe seems to have formed in us a finite representative, an intellect, a sympathy, a will.

Now confessedly religion is the central, most vital, and most noble part of our nature. It must be properly developed in an individual man or he is deficient, an empty shell, form without substance, dead. No other element of nature can be substituted for this ; no other can perform its functions or supply its place.

This general fact could be illustrated by innumerable instances. The intelligent and discriminating study of biography will establish this proposition. How can we decide a practical question but by facts ?

It is a remarkable fact that usually men, however renowned and however great, in the evening of their life, look back upon their career as useless and vain unless they have been animated by christian hope and faith. In how many such instances has the sun gone down in sorrow, and the evening darkness has been full of gloom and dread ! And how unnecessary is it to refer to instances of the opposite character ! Call it a delusion if you will, but if so, how pleasing the delusion that hovers around the departure of a noble, well-developed christian ! But can that be a delusion which is so universal and so perfectly in harmony with the highest aspirations of our nature, and with the grandest ideal of humanity ?

Christianity has introduced a new department into literature—a glowing and glorious description of death. The good man looks back upon life with gratitude, frequently with delight. His departure is like the setting of the sun, cloudless, or the clouds are gorgeous with the molten gold of heaven.

The same principle is confirmed by the estimation of the life and character of great men entertained by careful observers. It is impossible for us to accord unhesitating and unmingled approval and admiration to any other than a christian life. However acute the perceptions, abundant the information, original the thoughts, majestic the mental character, and powerful the influence of a man, if he was destitute of christian faith, hope and impulse, you cannot accord to him unmingled admiration, nor would you deem his characteristics as a whole desirable for yourself. I respect the maxim, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum dice*, or I might confirm this sentiment by a strict examination of some of the highest names of men who stood aloof from genuine Christian life. I doubt not that often Voltaire has been mentioned in the Christian pulpit without a just appreciation of his transcendent ability and influence, and with some perhaps unchristian but very natural indignation, excited by his own foolish and blasphemous expressions about Christ, and yet in the present light of dispassionate truth would any man approve his miserly disposition, his deception, and even lying and forgery, and does any one doubt that his ability, tempered and controlled by christian principle, might have accomplished as much for criticism and philosophy, and infinitely more for humanity and himself? Would it not have been better for the great critic and genius, Lessing, if in addition to the christian spirit and integrity which were the result of his early religious education, he had always maintained the highest personal rectitude and strong christian faith and habits of worship? Did such men as Kepler and Newton and Faraday lose anything—nay did they not gain infinitely by their genuine christian character?

It is very evident that men of thought and culture are exposed to peculiar and strong temptations to evil. These

temptations are not so much through the avenue of the intellect, as of the passions and the conduct. There is but little danger in the freest thought, if the heart loves purity and the soul acknowledges and cultivates allegiance to the holy God. Thought must be free. It is like light, if interfered with it is destroyed or gives distorted pictures, but there is a right and a normal way in which it should be exercised—and when free, sooner or later that way will be found.

I close this argument then with the conclusion—since man should aim at perfection, and since man's perfection implies religion, educated young men should cultivate religion.

The second argument which I adduce to fortify my proposition, is the duty of educated young men to improve gradually and constantly the public opinion of the age in which they live. As students of history, you are familiar with the fact that every age has a certain style of thinking and feeling, omnipresent, and sometimes seemingly almost omnipotent. Bacon believed in witchcraft, and though enunciating and eulogizing induction, often in his own opinions violated its tenets. The Puritans persecuted. But I need not multiply instances. It is an established canon of historical criticism, that no man is to be judged by the intellectual or moral standard of an age subsequent to that in which he lived. Men out of harmony with the grand thoughts and enterprises of their times, seldom accomplish much for themselves or the world. But there is a world-wide difference between leadership in an age, towards improvement, and a passive submission to the current. This distinction is vital, and infinite in its exposition of character. Nor is it easy to determine by outward connections or professions the position of a man on this matter. The grand stream of the age has many minor currents and eddies, seemingly antagonistic when really in harmony, and sometimes what seems to oppose is really promoting the onward flow. In the operations of modern warfare, advancing armies build their own roads and lay down their own railways. So does humanity advance. The deflection from an old course must not be too abrupt, or all that has been done heretofore will be lost, but it must always

be in the right direction. Often the improvement is almost imperceptible.

Now this age is contending for a rapid demolition of all barriers against the highest possible development of all human beings. Its motto is, all rights for all. Its crusade is, not to deliver the holy land where Christ lived and died, but every human soul for which Christ lived and died. It affects to be governed by justice and love. It seeks how to benefit oppressed classes and races, and forces upon them privileges faster than they ask for them, and before they are trained to use them. It puts fire-arms into the hands of children. It launches child-races out on the deep in steamships before they have learned navigation, or how to manage steam engines, or the more difficult art of self-control. The consequence will be the rapid destruction of the weak and the rapid development of the teachable and strong. Nothing is so cruel as philanthropy when it outruns the capacity of its beneficiaries to be profited by its indulgences. It is likely, therefore, that the next century will witness and record the extinction of more races and languages than any century past. But humanity will thereby assume a higher type.

But whatever these developments may be, one thing is sure, truth is unalterable and eternal. Truth necessitates religion. Christianity is the true religion. Its forms of presentation and its machinery of power may vary, but its essence and vitality are the same. If you believe as I do, that the teachings of Christ never can become obsolete, that the impulses to integrity which they awaken are needed in all ages by all men, that without them any societary arrangements, any human institutions, however wisely planned, will soon become corrupt and destructive of the dearest interests of man, then you will feel the increased obligation to cultivate genuine piety in this age so full of courage and momentum.

Leadership in society depends largely on native endowments, embracing both mind and body. The man of a large or compact and powerful brain, sustained by a good digestion and an extraordinary amount of that mysterious energy called vitality,

if weak in no essential faculty and not too eccentric to move in a channel where others can follow, is sure to be a leader. If poor, he will be likely to achieve sufficient riches to accomplish his end; if uneducated he will master, out of the schools, the enginery of thought and eloquence sufficiently to impress other men. Schools cannot produce such men nor destroy them. They are poets—not scribblers of rhyme or blank verse—but makers, creators of institutions, organizations, powers. They are born, not made.

But to such men education is an augmentation of power. It is machinery which only an engineer can use. It is a sword or a rifle, or a pen, which owes its value to the skill of the user.

One of the peculiar advantages of the higher institutions of learning in a free country, is their attractive power over such men. Many who have ability and a desire to use it in a certain way, are instinctively drawn into colleges and universities. It is not surprising, therefore, that facts show that so large a preponderance of the leaders of opinion are systematically educated men. This does not arise wholly from the power of education, but from the tending of a certain class of men to obtain education. Upon them rests the responsibility of national character. They are to guide the popular mind. They are to give expression and form to the demands of this age.

Shall this nation become corrupt, heartless, imbecile? Shall it be destitute of high aims and a profound faith? Shall the people seek only sensual gratification? Shall the ineradicable distinctions between right and wrong be overlooked, and shall those profoundest thoughts and hopes which have animated the strongest souls of all ages be pronounced obsolete and useless? These questions young men of education must answer. They must be prepared to combat error in theory, and must demonstrate by practice the infinite value of truth. They must experience and therefore know the value of the teachings of Christ.

Let it not be supposed that a nation cannot perish. What is a nation in the sight of God? God, with an eternity to

work in, can afford to be as lavish of nations as of men! Scores of them have died, and now occupy nameless graves without a monument. If it shall deserve it, our nation will have such a fate.

Another argument which I adduce to fortify my main proposition, is the essential weakness and inevitable collapse and ruin of any other foundation either for essential positive usefulness, a desirable reputation, or the highest eternal good.

If this assertion is dogmatic, it is nevertheless justifiable and right. The world must not always be peopled by children. It is time for a generation emancipated from the puerilities and bubble-blowing, air-castle building, ambitions of infidels. Every generation since the advent of Christ, has presented a new swarm of these fancy architects—men “ever learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth.” It would require the research of a devoted antiquarian to unearth from the rubbish of past ages the relics of these conceits. Many of them have evaporated and left no trace behind. Many of them are mutually antagonistic, and literally devour each other. The history of free thought, so called, is for the most part literally a history of folly. It is useful only to illustrate the boundless credulity of the human intellect so soon as it forsakes the great primal truths of the reason, and the great revealed facts of the Bible. The devotee of the new ambition fancies that he can build up society on a new foundation, that he can secure fruit without the legitimate stock upon which only it can grow, makes his experiment, passes away, and is forgotten. Among the latest instances of the kind is the miscalled “positive philosophy,” based on the radical error that every human soul in its normal development assumes three types as distinct as the larva, chrysalis and the fly, and that society assumes the same three types, the last only being perfect. In fact, manhood never loses the elements of childhood. The first appearing energies of the soul are even the most valuable, and never to be superseded. Faith has its office in the beginning and will never lose its office. If repressed in its proper development it will assume some wild irregular manifestation. As if to illus-

trate the folly of this theory which for a brief hour assumed to be a *nova instauratio*, its author sank into imbecility, and became the victim and hierophant of a superstition not surpassed in folly by the grossest fetichism of ancient Egypt or modern Dahomey; and his philosophy which once swelled bubble-like into the dimensions of the sun, reflecting the colors of a rainbow, will hereafter be described in cyclopedias in a paragraph, among the defunct follies of the past.

Would you exert a permanent positive influence for good, array yourself among those who stand upon and defend the great central truths of God. These are certainly presented in the inspired instructions constituting the Holy Scriptures. These cannot be comprehended except by those who humbly, earnestly reduce to practice their divine teachings. These, too, are not yet exhausted in their signification or power. Erroneous interpretations and especially defective and partial interpretations may be current, and need improvement. On them stand—and you can never fall, for they are eternal.

How stimulating to all the noblest aspirations of manhood is it to be an American! How many born in other lands become Americans from choice! Where is there such a prodigality of experimentations, where so great a demand for truth? Where so grand a prospect for the future?

And yet nations perish. Races perish. Some, perhaps, are utterly forgotten and unknown. By the law of perspective, present ages always seem fraught with most momentous interests, but it is something more than nearness of view that impresses us with the magnitude of the problems about to be practically solved on these shores before the dawn of the twentieth century. There are some particulars in which America is not so desirable a home for scholars as the oldest nations of Europe. We have not here so exquisite a culture in art or even in science. The modern Athens of the world is not on our shores. Students from all lands do not resort hither to complete their education. The division of scientific and literary labor is not here so minute as in France and Germany. The leaders in the professions are not yet American. Our best

books are translations or republications. Our scholars resort to Europe to complete their education. But here we have the largest field in which to apply the latest results. Here is furnished the largest market for the best books. Here the average of culture is highest. Here the dreams of theorists are subjected to the best practical tests. Here scholarship is rendered robust by the most vigorous contest with its foes. Here, more than elsewhere, perhaps, the truth of God is compelled to stand on its own merit, and calls for the ablest defenders.

We have just passed through a contest that has awakened the most intense interest of the civilized world. Many of our scholars have laid down the book and the pen, and taken up the rifle and the sword. Some who began the college life with you have fallen in battle and others have survived many a hard fought contest. Your Alma Mater has sent out nearly fifteen hundred of its students and alumni to fight for the Union—as was becoming, the largest number from any American University. Their heroism will never be forgotten. Their names shall yet be chiseled on marble, and will be imperishable in the archives of the University.

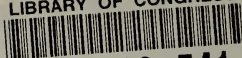
But the hardest part of the strife is yet before us. You need not envy them their opportunity to win rapid promotion and eternal admiration. What they fought for is now to be perpetuated by Christianity. This and this only is the bulwark of our nation's safety. Christian charity, Christian enterprise, Christian doctrine. The destiny of our nation is not to be decided by its geography, but by the intellectual and moral character of its people. The current of thought and feeling among us is not a Mississippi torrent decided in its direction by a valley scooped out in prehistoric times, or by the configuration of the land, but by the thoughts which shall be generated and fostered by the leaders of the people. You are responsible for your faith and your life. Upon you a large portion of the nation's responsibility shall rest. Will you strive to fulfill your mission? I doubt it not.

I had purposed to present as a fitting conclusion of this discourse several dangers which beset the scholar, but I forbear to

weary your patience now. Permit me in conclusion to offer a few remarks of a more personal character. This is the first class, during my present connection with the University, whose entire college life I have been permitted to observe. I have been aware of your progress term by term from the beginning. I have seen your ranks occasionally diminished, and closed up again and re-enforced. Your influence has always been in behalf of industry, temperance, respect for order and culture and christianity. If you have a respectful remembrance of the authorities of the University, be assured it is reciprocated by an appreciation of your hearty coöperation with us. Not only the warmest wishes of the Faculty, but their largest expectations of your success attend you. May the benediction of God rest upon you, and be your eternal reward.

You came hither from different parts of our country having received by inheritance and choice, different political and religious views. No effort has been made to reduce you to the same model. You have been educated, not trained. While you are more comprehensive and liberal, I trust also that you see more clearly and feel more vividly the value of the primal principles of truth, which it seems to be the great object of God to reveal more and more to the honest and obedient. As you have learned, now endeavor to work. Look higher than to distinction or honor, or wealth. Seek to show to others the right way. Ask of God for wisdom, and you cannot fail.

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